Public Reason of Interpretation

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Abstract: Interpretative activity is a rational cognition of man on objective existence, and when this kind of reason blends with publicness in social field and integrates into public reason of man, in essence, it is the rational cognition of man as subject on materialistic world in life; in practice, it is the spontaneous consciousness of man on the significance, anxiety and construction of his own being. Only in public rational field can the meaning of text be judged correctly and understood, and the interpretation obtain the identity of legitimacy. In the interpretive behavior of human beings, the aims of public reasons are as follows: first, to satisfy the rational cognitive requirement of interpretive subject and make its achievements shared by rational beings; secondly, to promote the interpretation of object to reach the certainty of meaning and restrict people to interpret metaphysically according to principle of freedom. Due to the general misinterpretation of the practice in interpretive activity, public reason of interpretation adopts value and meaning as a pattern. In the stage of recognizing regulation so as to acquire fact, it is a mixture of cognition, understanding and proving with heterogeneous, coinciding and contradictory textual meaning, which results in the foundation for the rational cognition of the truth. In the stage of ascertain knowledge, it opposes nihilistic interpretation and constructs an interpersonal interpretative and understanding relationship with its public nature to know the commonality of text so as to form the common understanding of the common nature of text.

1 Introduction

Interpretative activity is a rational cognition of man on objective existence, when a text reaches the public sphere, it means it enters the public eye and will accept all kinds of reviews and disputes from interpretative subjects, and then the implied meaning in the text will be discovered. Hannah Arendt notes: “Obviously, the character of the public realm must change in accordance with the activities admitted into it, but to a large extent the activity itself changes its own nature too.”. Arendt does not devise the concept of the public realm with any common measurement or denominator can ever be devised, but “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.”. But, in the whole public sphere, Is interpretation a free behavior of rational cognition? And does it have standards to follow? In this context, when a text as an external form of verbal sign get into the discourse space of public sphere, it seemingly evolve into the community of meaning with publicity. But is that really the case? After carefully looking back upon the general hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer and Lico’s textual hermeneutics, it is amazingly discovered that the text reviewed by all kinds of interpretative subjects not only can not automatically generate the community of meaning and but also bring about the deviation, attenuation and variation of textual meaning due to the lacking of public reason. So, this article will discuss the following three questions: what is the public reason of textual interpretation? What goals does the public reason realize during the process of textual interpretation? and What paradigmatic effect does it have in interpretative behavior?

2 The Definition for Public Reason

In the Theses on Public Hermeneutics by professor Zhang Jiang, he proposes that “Interpretation is a public behavior”. Interpretation as public behavior is a rational behavior of man, professor Zhang Jiang’s view endow interpretative behavior of man with a basic attribute — public reason. So, a question will be come up with, what is public reason of textual interpretation? What goals does the public reason realize during the process of textual interpretation? and What paradigmatic effect does it have in interpretative behavior?

1 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, p.30,
2 Ibid., p.32.
3 Zhang Jiang, “Theses on Public Hermeneutics”.
4 The complete works of Marx and Engels, volume 20, p. 667.
the foundation for discussing problems is lost, this article
does not have the domain of discussion.

2.1 The publicness of reason

Judging from the history of western thought theory, this
theory, publicness of man, originates from the public
domain of politics. In the ancient Greek society, the
foundation of city-state can be established due to
disintegration of family relations. So, outside the family
organized naturally, the community organization like city-
state arises. Aristotle, the philosophy pioneer in ancient
Greece, points out that man is by nature political animals.
He means that family domain is the one of private life, it
cannot be mixed with the realm of public life in city-state.
Aristotle repeatedly stresses that private life is not the
manifestation of human reason, human reason is
determined by public life, only the reason from different
individuals is put into public realm and then criticized and
discussed, can the public reason be formed and accepted
by society.

Furthermore, some scholars nowadays holds that
“reason is the product of human civilization”, this kind of
idea stems from the rise of modern contract politics.
Contrasted with ancient public sphere, modern public
sphere is constructed by such contractarian as Hobbes,
Locke and Rousseau. Whether Leviathan by Hobbes,
Concerning Civil Government by Locke or Social
Contract Theory by Rousseau, all of them talk about
natural state, social state and political society over and
over again, which means that people in that period attach
importance to the reason—the internal relation between
society and political society. Rousseau deems that man
acquire the normative restrain and regain the publicness.

In short, reason is human nature, when it mingles with
the publicness in social sphere and congeals into public
reason, the reason gains new qualitative description, it is
in essence the rational cognition of man as subject on
materialistic world in life; in practice, it is the spontaneous
consciousness of man on the meaning, worry, care,
longing, construction and pursuit of his own being.

2.2 The reason of public sphere

Public reason can be regarded as the rationality of man in
public sphere, the reason in public sphere and the one in
private life, they are different in meaning, objective, and
theory. In a general sense, public reason refers to the
rational wisdom and intuitive knowledge that gradually
forms in the practical life. It is “a kind of spiritual strength
that man has for adjusting and controlling human desire
and behavior”. The wisdom, intuitive knowledge and
objective of spiritual strength is man’s value and the
significance of human existence, the completeness of
man’s performance, confirmation and admiration for
himself in reality, it is “in a holistic way, that is to say, as
a whole human being, to occupy the full essence of oneself”.

Since the beginning of western enlightenment
philosophy, reason is the basic core concept. but this kind
of reason mainly refers to the individual rationality
represented by Kant, because reason still does not possess
public significance for Kant. After Kant, Hegel, the great
philosopher of German classical philosophy, takes reason
as “absolute spirit”, he claims that “Reason is the soul of
the world and lives in the world, reason constitutes the
world’s internal, existing, profound essence, or reason is
the universal of the world”. Moreover, he believes that
reason constitutes the nature and law of the universe, so
whether nature, society or text are the product of reason
self-realization. In other word, Hegel changes reason from
individual to wholeness—the public reason in a sense.
Hegel deems the reason in a whole sense as the standard
of objects existence in reality, so a famous quotation
comes into being “Everything that is rational is real;
Everything that is realistic is rational”. This view
becomes the logical starting point of the theory
development of different schools of hermeneutics in
modern times. When looking back at Hegel’s epistemic
Logic of reason, we will have more understanding of
hermeneutics in a general sense. It is human being’s
deepening cognition of reason that facilitates the
hermeneutic behavior to form “An integrated multi-party
community”.

Furthermore, human interpretative action includes two
elements: one is interpreter, another one is interpretative
object—text. The human reason with public nature
dictates that human interpretative action must be done in
a public sphere rather than a private sphere, especially
cannot be confined by a large quantity of endless and
offbeat perspectives. In our daily life, interpretation and
understanding is a very happy thing, people merrily
communicate and lightly read, everything is
spontaneously on. But, when the authentic meaning of a
text is needed to grasp strictly in public sphere and the
understanding is caught in conflict and chaos as well, the
meaning of text and method of comprehending will
naturally become the object that people ask in reply.
Therefore, the public interpretation featured by the unity
and identity of text become the proper meaning of human
public rationality.

In literary field, the public field of literature begins in
café, various kinds of meetings, and family discussion of
the upper class, it occasionally emerges in the form of
literature salon without distinct political demand. But it
quickly develops into a cultural form confronting with the
state machine. According to Habermás’s conception of the

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5 Yang Guorong, _Reason and Value_, p. 52.
6 Wu Zengji et al., _The Call of Rational Spirit_, p. 1.
7 _The complete works of Marx and Engels_, volume 42, p. 123.
8 G.W.F. Hegel, _Small Logic_, p. 83.
9 G.W.F. Hegel, _Small Logic_, p. 45.
10 Zhang Jiang, “Theses on Public Hermeneutics”.
public domain of literature, this is a discourse space in which the dominant discourse creates the mechanism of excluding "others" -- non-mainstream subcultural concepts always hope to obtain the right of free speech and even dominance through struggle, while the dominant discourse always tries to "exclude" the dissenters \(^{11}\). Some scholar has commented that "the publicity is interventional, intrusive, critical and has obvious political appeal, and arouses the public's wide resonance and sense of participation" \(^{12}\). But for a piece of literary work, the appeal, and arouses the public's wide resonance and sense of interventional, intrusive, critical and has obvious political appeal, and arouses the public's wide resonance and sense of participation" \(^{12}\). But for a piece of literary work, the appeal, and arouses the public's wide resonance and sense of participation. 11. But for a piece of literary work, the appeal, and arouses the public's wide resonance and sense of participation. 11. But for a piece of literary work, the appeal, and arouses the public's wide resonance and sense of participation. 12. Zhao Yong, “The Transformation of Literary Activities and the Disappearance of Literary Publicness”.

Public reason is a unique rationality of human beings and has its own inherent regularity. Seen from the essence, man is a rational creature, rationality is the essential attribute universally owned by human individuals. When human consciousness has a boundary between the public sphere and the private sphere, the rationality of the individual is gradually expanded and then transformed into a public reason that needs to be obeyed by people in the process of integration and evolution. Judging from another perspective, In the evolutionary history of human interpretation, before Schleiermacher raises interpretation in the first time, firstly, he systematically researches interpretation, this is a Kantian objective (Reason is the critique of reason, namely critique of pure reason). That is to say, Schleiermacher begins to transcend these previous interpretative individuals that only concerned with specific text applications and scattered annotation techniques, He elevated human interpretation to a general sense of epistemological meaning, which means the public reason of humanity begins to move from the edge to the center in the process of the development of hermeneutic theory.

Based on such research tradition, Dilthey proposes a more profound view that existence is the text of interpretation. it means that interpretation is no longer the concrete concept of life, humanity and history but the basic category of cognition under rational vision. To some extent, Human public reason is not an abstract theory that transcends human individuals but is commonly found in the minds of mature and normal human beings. In the interpretative behavior of human beings, Text is composed of meaningful plots and sentences, so text as a whole makes sense, when human public reason interprets the potential meanings of these texts, it represents a kind of basic mind activity of human society.

Generally speaking, the subject of interpretative behavior is man, reason is the basic attribute of man. As human nature, though reason has the particularity that individuals own, it must have something in common. Publicness is the general characteristic that human reason has; the Commonness is not only reflected in the universality of rationality but also in the commonality of rationality. Whether the universality or commonality, both show the public characteristics of human reason. This kind of publicness contains the truth of human cognition behavior, namely, interpretation must conform to the objective laws of existence. In other word, “this kind of publicness shows the universality and commonality of rationality, or the rational outcome is shared by all rational human beings, which means the public use of reason” \(^{13}\).

### 3.2 Public reason should promote the interpretative object to achieve the determinacy of meaning

Public reason is purposive, it aims at the purposiveness of interpretative behavior. Looking back to the developing history of hermeneutics, “from the intentional fallacy of

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\(^{11}\) Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 24.

\(^{12}\) Zhao Yong, “The Transformation of Literary Activities and the Disappearance of Literary Publicness”.

\(^{13}\) Zhang Jiang, “Theses on Public Hermeneutics”.

\(^{14}\) Zhang Jiang, “Theses on Public Hermeneutics”.

\(^{15}\) Gong Qun, “The Publicness of Reason and Public Reason”.

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New criticism, *Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes to *what is the author* by Foucault, it can be discovered that alienating and denying the author, isolating and blocking the relationship between the author and the text, and taking text as a pure, suspended word and object become the mainstream view and basic claims. This interpretative path eliminates the basis of the human cognitive world—the public reason, and always makes interpretative subject understand a text according to its own subjective perception and ignore the subjective meaning of the text, finally shifts or mutates the certainty of interpretation. In interpretative behavior of human beings, owing to the object difference of rational cognition and interpretation, and the different thinking ability and thinking mode of the interpretative subject, the indeterminacy of meaning of the interpretative object is very prominent. Therefore, grasping the indeterminacy of the interpretative meaning not only displays the external requirement of the subject but also shows the intrinsic characteristics of the object; It requires that Interpretive behavior has the universal meaning that can follow and inherit in logic, as well as the interpretation results have the universality of human rational cognition.

But, how does the certainty of interpretation realize in interpretative behavior? As people know, human interpretation is a behavior of rational cognition, Kant hold that the rational cognition behavior can be viewed as cognitive reason or practical reason. To be specific, cognitive reason plays an instrumental role in the practical activity of the interpretative subject, while practical reason plays a normative or guiding role. They mean that people take cognitive categories and various disciplines or experiential knowledge as tools to understand the meaning of the text, then explaining the world or changing the world. In addition, according to Kant's laws of nature and laws of freedom, In the case of natural law, it is a law of causation; in terms of laws of freedom, it satisfies the legislative principle for self. The objects interpreted by human beings are primarily those who have natural causality, the complex relationships between these objects have different particularities. The interpretation for these particularities can not be done according to laws of freedom. The public reason of interpretation is to limit people’s metaphysical interpretation Metaphysical interpretation and let human reason in the public domain hold dominant position in the interpretation behavior, then promoting the interpretative object to accomplish the determinacy of meaning.

4 The Public Reason Paradigm of Interpretation

In interpretative behavior, public reason needs to meet the rational cognition requirement of interpretative subjects and accomplish the determinacy of interpretative meaning. After discussing the question, the following questions inevitably need to be probed: how should the public reason of interpretation play its role? Does it have certain operational paradigms? Due to differences in history, space or culture, the interpretative subject cannot be in the same context, time and space with the text author, the context and distance of space and time between readers and authors often result in misinterpretation of interpretation. For instance, people do have a better understanding of what Plato or other philosophers would have wanted to say but unclearly stated about objects, categories, or laws, as Kant once said he could understand better Plato than Plato himself. However, what Kant says about understanding is already a philosophical creation or criticism, not an interpretation of Platonism. This example illustrates a truth: the public reason of interpretation must follow certain operational paradigm in order to promote the readers to re-create or re-experience the historical context and social environment of the text. Moreover, because “the operational paradigm of public reason is given by the basic cognitive norms of human beings” (17). The basic cognitive norm of human beings is a multidimensional concept, it’s hard to discuss it in details. So, for understanding the public rational paradigm of interpretation, the different stages in the process of human cognition firstly need to be considered and explored.

Specifically speaking, the operational process of public reason can be divided into two cognitive stages: the stage of cognitive norms of acquiring facts and the stage of cognitive norms of confirming knowledge.

4.1 At the stage of cognitive norms of acquiring facts, people’s interpretation for text are mainly about the logical analysis of vocabularies and grammars. People rely on them to answer such questions: what kind of text can be accepted as a fact? what cannot be? We have a variety of ways to get facts, and what is more appropriate? Interpretive behaviors follow the cognitive norms that people should abide by rather than the norms people comply with. That’s why interpretation has normative significance. In real life situations, Although the cognitive norms that should be observed in the interpretation of the text are not necessarily followed by specific persons, it can still be done by others. Therefore, there is a difference between the cognitive norms that should be observed and the cognitive norms that people observe, but it is not so obvious. As a matter of fact, the research field of hermeneutists is generally restricted to the cognitive norms that people observe, and then look for facts for them.

4.2 At the stage of cognitive norms of confirming knowledge, such numerous accepted interpretations as author-centered, context reconstruction and empathic understanding, will commonly play a role in human interpretative behavior. Analyzing from the internal operating logic of the interpretative behavior, some people will admit the uncertainty of text meaning, some will stick to the validity of text meaning. “Anyway, it must be admitted that the concept of a text constitutes a central concept only in the linguistic structure of the explanatory concept…… And only from the point of view of interpretation does it come to be understood as a real
given”(18). According to this concept, the text, as a real given object in the interpretative behavior, means that it is an objective existence, so, it is not necessarily irrational, arbitrary, or subjective interpretation to insist on the indeterminacy of text meaning, it does not mean that interpretation has no norms to follow. Because of the objective existence of interpreters and texts, the meaning of text is also an objective existence. In a general sense, text is both a part of history and a product of human rational knowledge, hence, the understanding of text meaning has the double regulation and restriction of history and reason, guaranteeing the validity of the interpretive behavior.

5. Conclusion

For an individual, reason always belongs to someone’s, it is inherent in the personal spiritual world. Anyone’s inner world is a private world. The private world reveals to the world some or most of them through his actions and words. But the question is that His ken is private and always interprets activities from private standpoint or personal feelings and motives. But the private standpoint must be understood by others, or what he says, thinks and does cannot be comprehended by other, others don’t know how to communicate with him. In other words, the public rational paradigm of interpretation is something in the other spirits that is common to oneself, which can construct an interpersonal relationship of understanding. Starting from the fact that intersubjectivity coexists, the subject of interpretation must convert from the private world to an intersubjective subject world, and then achieve a kind of intersubjective commonness and coexistence from the subjective will and objectivity. Only in this way can the public reason have the meaning and value of the paradigm, it finds the commonness of the text with its own publicity to reach an understanding and consensus on the publicity of the text.

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